United Nations A/60/201

General Assembly

Distr.: General
5 August 2005
English
Original: English/French/Spanish

Sixtieth session
Item 45 of the provisional agenda*
Culture of peace

Promotion of interreligious dialogue**

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 59/23, contains the views of Member States and entities of the United Nations system on the promotion of interreligious dialogue.

* A/60/150.

** The present report is submitted late in order to include as many views by Member States and international organizations as possible.

05-45337 (E) 290805 300805

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 59/23 of 11 November 2004, the General Assembly affirmed that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue constituted important dimensions of the dialogue among civilizations and of the culture of peace. The Assembly also invited the Secretary-General to bring the promotion of interreligious dialogue to the attention of Governments and relevant international organizations and to submit a report thereon, including all views received, to the Assembly at its sixtieth session. With reference to resolution 59/23, the Secretariat issued a note verbale dated 10 February 2005 and also addressed a letter to international organizations. The views expressed in response to these communications are summarized below.

2. The present report also contributes to the implementation of General Assembly resolution 59/142 of 15 December 2004, entitled "Promotion of religious and cultural understanding, harmony and cooperation", in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General, in the context of the documentation presented under the agenda item entitled "Culture of peace", to include information on this topic.

II. Views of Member States

A. Argentina

[Original: Spanish]

3. The Argentine Government is taking practical steps to promote interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Meetings with representatives of various faiths and with indigenous communities' religious leaders have been held throughout the country to learn about religious life in their parishes or areas and to explain and raise awareness of current policy. Representatives of various religions have also been gathered together and consulted for their views and input regarding the preliminary draft reform of the National Register of Religions Act, drawn up by the Secretariat of Worship and shortly to be referred to the executive branch for consideration and transmittal to the Congress. The draft provides for a new voluntary register of religious organizations, as recommended in international conventions. It would confer legal personality in the area of religion.

4. Efforts will be made to enshrine in law the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and to declare 25 November "Religious Freedom Day". Work is in progress on various projects and programmes to encourage respect for religious diversity, such as training seminars for the security forces and the prison service, among others. There are plans to provide social agents with religious diversity training so that they are aware of, and respect, religious differences. Assistance was provided for the organization of the eighteenth meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, held in July 2004.

5. A publication for educators, civil servants, social leaders, members of NGOs and the various technical teams of parts of the Government, entitled "Living together in cultural diversity: collected laws, treaties and declarations", was

compiled and issued jointly with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

6. The Secretariat of Worship, the Universidad del Salvador and the Asociación Latinoamericana para el Estudio de las Religiones (Latin American Association for the study of religions) are collaborating for the first time in organizing the third Latin American colloquium on religion and society, held in Buenos Aires in July 2005 to provide a forum for reflection to encourage tolerance through understanding. In the same vein, the Secretariat of Worship took part in an ecumenical and interreligious dialogue called the National Meeting for Peace, held on 17 April 2005.

7. Great importance is attached to making interreligious dialogue part of the agenda of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). To that end, meetings have been held in the past year with the member countries' authorities to exchange experiences and coordinate approaches, including legislation. In that connection, the MERCOSUR Political Consultation and Coordination Forum unanimously approved the Argentine proposal to hold two seminars to discuss the establishment of a MERCOSUR interreligious cooperation and consultation forum. Argentina has also proposed that the specialized meetings held within the MERCOSUR framework should be widened to include the Latin American Integration Association (LAIA) and the Ibero-American Summit.

B. Austria

8. The Government of Austria has carried out activities to promote interreligious dialogue for two decades. At the initiative of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Austria, the first conference of heads of Islamic centres and imams in Europe was held in June 2003 in Graz, Austria. The final declaration of the conference affirmed the compatibility of Islam with the values of pluralism and democracy, separation of State and religion, respect of human rights, gender equality and condemnation of extremism. It also decided on the creation of a permanent council of heads of Islamic centres and imams in Europe, with a secretariat in Vienna, run by the Islamic faith community in Austria. This permanent conference will promote the ideal that dialogue is the only gate to peace.

9. At the initiative of the high school of theology in Austria, conferences dedicated to the exchange of ideas among religions are being organized on a regular basis. Particularly noteworthy are the Iranian-Austrian conferences (the fourth conference will be held in Vienna in 2007) and the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table, which held its third plenary session in Vienna in July 2004, under the heading "Poverty and Injustice — Signs of Crisis in the Present Social Order Worldwide".

10. Created by the former Archbishop of Vienna in the framework of the Second Vatican Council in 1964, the Pro Oriente foundation aims at fostering and promoting the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches. The activities of the foundation include research projects, conferences and symposia (the most recent, under the heading "Europe, do not forget your martyrs" was attended for the first time by a representative of Judaism), theological consultations (most recently with nine different churches of the Syriac tradition in Kerala/South India) and publications. An important contribution to the

dialogue among religions are the organization of visits in Austria by patriarchs of the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches.

11. More recently, the activities also extended to the interreligious dialogue with Islam, with a visit of the Minister for Religious Affairs of Egypt to the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Vienna. Islam has benefited from State recognition in Austria since 1912. This led to a positive climate that encourages the integration of the almost 400,000 Muslims living in Austria. The affiliation of all Muslims in Austria to the Islamic faith community in Austria may also be considered as positive.

C. Azerbaijan

12. In 2001, the Government of Azerbaijan established a State Committee for Work with Religious Associations for the registration of all active religious communities and promotion of interreligious dialogue. More than 320 communities have been registered by the Committee. The Committee is the principal governmental body promoting interreligious dialogue in the country. In 2003, it held 12 seminars for different communities on the history of several religions, including Orthodox Christians, Jews, Catholics and Baptists. One seminar was devoted to the relationship between the State and religions.

13. In 2003 and 2004, the State Committee also held a number of international conferences, including one on the subject of "Religions and Democracy: Theory and Historical Practice". In September 2003, the State Committee held a seminar on the International Day of Peace on the peoples' right to peace and the importance of promoting a culture of peace and religious tolerance between different confessions. In October 2003, the Committee held a seminar together with Georgetown University on religious tolerance in Azerbaijan and the United States of America. In 2004, the State Committee held a series of seminars for different confessions with the aim to move from religious tolerance towards effective interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

14. In October 2004, 40 religious communities established the Unity of Religious Communities of Azerbaijan in the Name of Peace and Armistice. In May 2005, the Unity initiated a pilot project entitled "Religious Communities against HIV/AIDS".

D. Belarus

15. The Government of Belarus reported that there are 2,971 religious organizations in the country linked to 25 confessions and sects. Nationwide, 80 per cent of the population is Russian Orthodox and 14 per cent is Roman Catholic. The Government plays an important role in promoting interreligious dialogue, in particular through international public centres such as the Saints Cyril and Mefody Christian Educational Centre, the Saints Cyril and Mefody Institute of Theology of the Belarusian State University and the Institute of Religious Dialogue and Interreligious Communications of the Belarusian Exarchate, under the guidance of the Minsk and Slutsk Metropolitan Filaret, the Belarusian Patriarchate's Exarches.

16. The main purpose of these activities is education, information and cultural exchange among different confessions. The Belarusian State University holds

international theological conferences with the active participation of representatives of different Christian faiths. In 2003 and 2004, within the framework of the European Bridges programme, the University held the International Conference on Interreligious Dialogue and Reconciliation through Art with the participation of Orthodox Christian and Catholic churches as well as Muslim and Jewish religious organizations. The delegation of the Universal Council of Churches, headed by its Secretary-General, visited Minsk in June 2004. A number of regional interreligious conferences were also organized by other Belarusian Universities in Grodno, Vitebsk and Brest.

E. Georgia

17. The Government of Georgia reported that several religions have coexisted peacefully in the country for ages. Article 9 of the Constitution of Georgia guarantees complete freedom of belief and religion and recognizes the special role of the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of the country as well as its independence from the State. Relations between the two are determined by a constitutional agreement, which fully complies with international norms.

18. Currently, there is no legislation in Georgia regarding the registration of religious organizations, which enjoy wide freedom. Despite general tolerance towards minority religious groups, citizens have remained apprehensive with regard to non-traditional religious groups or sects. A Georgian court recently sentenced to jail a former Orthodox priest whose followers had engaged in a number of violent attacks against non-traditional religious minorities. Lately, Georgian society has moved towards a clearer understanding of and public position against religious intolerance and extremism.

F. Indonesia

19. The Government of Indonesia reported on various activities initiated to promote interreligious dialogue. An International Conference of Islamic Scholars was held in Jakarta from 23 to 25 February 2004, in cooperation with Nahdhatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in the country representing Sunni Islam. The objective was to further promote Islam as "Rahmatan lil alamin" (blessings for the universe) since the Islamic norms and teachings oblige all the Ummah to deem peace, justice, freedom, moderation, tolerance, balance, consultation and equity as fundamental to their way of life. The conference produced the Jakarta declaration, which supports, inter alia, the enhancement of constructive and interactive interreligious dialogue and international efforts to promote peace, security and prosperity, while fostering principles of mutual respect, tolerance and global peaceful coexistence. The conference agreed to set up a mechanism to evaluate the implementation of its plan of action and exchange views on possible strategies on a biennial basis. A secretariat will be established to support that mechanism.

20. In addition, the International Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation, on the subject of community-building and harmony, was held in Yogyakarta on 6 and 7 December 2004. The dialogue was co-sponsored by the Government of Australia in cooperation with Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic organization in

Indonesia, and was attended by approximately 150 delegates from 14 countries, including prominent religious figures and community leaders. The objective of the dialogue was to develop an inclusive proposal to bridge differences and find specific common grounds for practical cooperation. The conference served as a basis for regional networking on understanding and tolerance among faiths.

21. Pursuant to the decision of the Asia-Europe Meeting of October 2004, the Indonesian Government, in cooperation with the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the European Commission, will launch an initiative for interfaith dialogue at a conference scheduled for July 2005.

22. In today's global multicultural environment, interfaith dialogue should be encouraged at all levels of society so that it can contribute to harmony in interpersonal as well as inter-State relationships. The acknowledgement of global multiculturalism should be reflected in the respect for the sovereign integrity of all nations and the continued commitment of developed countries to assist developing ones. In this regard, the United Nations may serve to facilitate this noble objective. Various segments of society, such as religious groups, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations, should also be encouraged to participate in the process so that it can yield results.

G. Italy

[Original: French]

23. As part of its effort to promote dialogue between religions, the Italian Government supported the establishment in 2004 of the Mediterranean Observatory, a foundation constituted under private law. The foundation's main function is to set up a "Rome Club" consisting of prominent figures from the countries of the Mediterranean, particularly its southern shore, who will meet regularly to discuss political, social and economic issues. Dialogue between the monotheistic religions is an essential part of the Observatory's activities, and it has organized three major events since its foundation: (a) a conference on Islam and peace, held in Rome in October 2004 to provide an opportunity to interact with prominent figures from the Muslim world; (b) the "*Sponde*" ("shores") event on issues affecting the region, which recently included a day devoted to interreligious dialogue; and (c) a series of lectures by prominent Mediterranean figures.

24. Italy also made a vital contribution to the establishment, in April 2005, of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures. This foundation, based in Alexandria, Egypt, fosters a dynamic vision of the dialogue between civilizations by encouraging intellectual cooperation, which will undoubtedly include interreligious dialogue. As part of a project entitled "Avenue of multiple perspectives", a study has been carried out to examine religious pluralism in school texts and curricula. The study will give rise to pilot projects in several religious schools belonging to the three monotheistic religions.

H. Kazakhstan

25. The first Congress of World and Traditional Religions, held in Astana on 23 and 24 September 2003, was the first congress of leaders of world and traditional

religions. The Congress, held on the initiative of the President of Kazakhstan, drew widespread support from political leaders worldwide. The Declaration adopted at the Congress sent a clear message that people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds could and should live together in peace and harmony. Senior clerics from the Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, Taoist and other faiths declared that extremism, terrorism and other forms of violence in the name of religion had nothing to do with genuine understanding of religion and hence should be rejected as a threat to human life. They stressed that interreligious dialogue was key for social development and the promotion of the well-being of all peoples, fostering tolerance, mutual understanding and harmony. They pledged to continue the dialogue on a regular basis and to meet again in Astana in three years. The Declaration has been issued as a document of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly.

26. In October 2004 and May 2005, Kazakhstan hosted the meetings of the secretariat of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, at which representatives discussed and agreed on plans for the second full Congress, now scheduled for September 2006 in Astana. In order to broaden the discussion, participants will include scientists, statesmen and public figures. The Congress is expected to launch an appeal to the international community for radical steps to fight poverty, disease and social injustice as fertile grounds for religious extremism. Special resolutions will likely call on leaders engaged in conflicts to seek peace.

27. Work is under way to establish a closer coordination between the Congress and international and regional organizations, first and foremost the United Nations, on interreligious dialogue, which is an important element of the culture of peace and the dialogue among civilizations.

I. Malaysia

28. The Government of Malaysia reported that within the country there were Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Confucian and Taoist values, Christianity in its various denominations and Sikh and Islamic religious and legal practices. Today, Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and Muslims form the largest single religious group (60.4 per cent of the population). However, the right to freedom is protected by the Constitution and other religions are freely practised, in a tolerant and harmonious environment.

29. The Government and civil society have taken various measures to promote interfaith dialogue in the country. Several religious and cultural celebrations have been recognized as official holidays. This has promoted better understanding, harmony and tolerance, in particular through the practice of joint celebration and the "open house" concept.

30. In May 2004, the Prime Minister of Malaysia introduced the Islam hadhari (civilizational Islam) concept, the principles of which are to create a just Government, comprehensive and balanced economic development, improved quality of life, care for minorities and women and the inculcation of strong cultural and moral values. The concept aims at managing this multiracial and multireligious country in a fair manner. In this regard, the office of the Prime Minister has embarked on a national campaign to explain the concept and principles of Islam

hadhari so that it is not misunderstood and is accepted as an approach to development and progress for the country.

31. Racial and religious harmony in Malaysia has been achieved by deliberate and sensible management of race relations through powersharing, managing the economy to promote growth and the equitable distribution of wealth and benefits. The Government has also made efforts to ensure racial and religious harmony through education at all levels. The Government has taken a number of institutional measures, such as establishing the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization and the Institute of Islamic Understanding. The Institute of Islamic Understanding, established to promote Islamic understanding in the country, has embarked on various projects to promote interreligious dialogue, such as religious forums on the radio, the publication of articles in local newspapers and Institute journals, research and participation in national and international conferences on interfaith dialogue. The work of the Institute has helped to bridge the gap between the various religious groups in the country.

32. Non-governmental organizations have been instrumental in promoting interreligious dialogue. In April 2002 and March 2003, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) initiated an interfaith dialogue in Kuala Lumpur. Participants included representatives from the Islamic Development Department, the Ulama Association and the Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism.

33. At the international level, Malaysia recently hosted the inaugural meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) commission of eminent persons, from 27 to 29 January 2005, in Putrajaya. The meeting prepared a comprehensive plan for promoting within Islamic societies and universally, policies and programmes on enlightened moderation in true consonance with the injunctions of Islam and its principles of tolerance, emancipation and exaltation of humankind. Participants outlined proposals for cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue, including through regional and multilateral organizations.

J. Malta

34. In Malta, education is used as a means of promoting sustainable tolerance and peace. The National Minimum Curriculum ensures that learning experiences lead not only to an approach of tolerance and coexistence but also to a valuable social environment in which others are respected and accepted for what they are more than for what they have. Freedom of conscience and worship is fully recognized in the Constitution and no person shall be required to receive instruction in religion if he or she objects to it or if, in the case of minors, objections are made by the parents. A school for those who profess the Muslim faith exists. The International Days for Tolerance and the Elimination of Racial Discrimination are celebrated at schools.

35. While the Catholic religion is taught in State schools, information is also given about the other main religions of the world. However, given the limited time available on the curriculum for religion, it is not feasible to grant detailed information. It is also recalled that the majority of the population professes to belong to a particular religion, namely the Roman Catholic Church, which limits the relevance of comparative religion.

36. Malta has hosted conferences on the dialogue between Muslims and Christians as well as ecumenical meetings between Christian denominations. The Malta Bible Society was the first Catholic bible society to form part of the United Bible Societies.

K. Niger

[Original: French]

37. The Government of Niger has taken stock of the authorities' activities to promote interreligious dialogue. Such efforts have included (a) the institutionalization of a formal framework known as the National Commission for Social Dialogue, in which political parties, religious associations and representatives of civil society seek peaceful solutions to any conflicts that may arise; (b) the celebration, in commemoration of the 24 April 1995 peace agreement between the Government and armed rebels in the north, of a national day of concord on that date every year, giving communities the opportunity to reaffirm their attachment to a culture of peace; and (c) the establishment of departmental land commissions in which all social strata and walks of life are represented, with a view to preventing and managing land disputes in their respective territories, thereby contributing significantly to peaceful coexistence between population groups.

L. The Philippines

38. The Government of the Philippines stressed its commitment to harnessing interreligious cooperation as an important means to pursuing peace. This is particularly important in a country where Islam, Christianity, Lumads and other indigenous peoples coexist. Amidst the differences in cultures and faiths that have resulted in violent clashes in the country, interfaith cooperation has been found to work efficiently with these three main groups, especially in multicultural Mindanao. The conduct of community-based interfaith dialogues is included as a key strategy under the peacebuilding and conflict prevention component of chapter 14, entitled "National Harmony: the Peace process", of the 2004-2010 medium-term Philippine development plan.

39. Interfaith dialogue in the Philippines has been a policy response to conflict. Mechanisms and structures have been shaped in order to achieve this end, such as the Bishops-Ulama Forum (BUF), the Peace-Centre in Zamboanga and the Zindanao Peaceweavers, all designed to address specific needs for dialogue over time. In particular, the Forum is a regional body of influential religious leaders representing the main three groups in Mindanao. Equipped with a wide network of institutions and recognized as a major stakeholder for peace and stability, the Forum has conducted several dialogues that have influenced the directions and decisions of both the local government and civil society in the region. In addition, in order to address poverty alleviation in depressed Muslim areas, the Forum transformed itself into the Bishops-Ulama Conference, which has received financial support from the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process for intercultural and interfaith dialogue projects. In addition, special interest has been accorded to the role of indigenous people and women in interfaith dialogues.

40. At the regional level, the Philippines took an active part in the Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation held in Indonesia in December 2004. The Philippines' delegation proposed the establishment of a permanent continuing forum for interfaith dialogue and cooperation in Oceania and the south-east Asian region. It also offered to host the next regional interfaith meeting in December 2005. The delegation of the Philippines will now work at expanding the convenors' group to include other key leaders of the different faiths, tap civil society and cultural institutions and initiate activities leading to a national interfaith summit, led by civil society, in September 2005 during National Peace Consciousness Month.

41. The Philippines take part in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) initiative on interfaith dialogue and in this framework, co-sponsored the Bali Interfaith Dialogue in July 2005. At the initiative of the Philippines, the General Assembly adopted resolution 59/23 on the promotion of interreligious dialogue, sponsored by 24 countries. In association with others, the Philippines launched a Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, held at United Nations Headquarters on 22 June 2005. This conference was unprecedented as it featured the tripartite partnership of several Member States, the United Nations system (through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the World Bank) and civil society led by the Committee of Religious non-governmental organizations at the United Nations. The Philippines support other related international initiatives, which are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

42. The Government of the Philippines is of the view that interfaith understanding is the principal peaceful and long-term solution for conflict prevention and the fight against terrorism. While counter-terrorism may be the immediate response and socio-economic programmes the medium-term approach, interfaith dialogue lies at the core of efforts to transform deeply rooted intercultural biases and discrimination. This is why the Government is strongly committed to setting up interfaith dialogue centres across the entire country, in partnership with local non-governmental organizations and religious groups. The Government is also developing a peace education module, which includes cultural diversity and the appreciation of different faiths, to be taught in schools throughout the country.

M. Portugal

43. The Government of Portugal reported that the first initiatives for the promotion of interreligious dialogue occurred in the framework of the Secretariado Entreculturas, an inter-ministerial body created in 2001 by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Education to promote intercultural education. In view of the close relationship between intercultural education and interreligious dialogue, the Secretariado Entreculturas publishes an annual pleura-confessional calendar registering the most representative festivities of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism as well as a description of and information on these religions. A team of representatives of the Secretariado Entreculturas participated in several European and international conferences and seminars. In November 2004, the Secretariado Entreculturas launched a new publication, entitled "Look at the Religious Patrimony, Understand the Culture". Designed for schools, this document visits the different places of worship of the city of Lisbon.

44. In December 2004, a resolution of the Council of Ministers established the "Mission for dialogue with religions", which contains an approved plan of activities, including (a) courses on the administration of intercultural and religious relationships, designed for teachers and workers that have contact with people of diverse religious sensibilities; (b) establishing an advisory group representing major religious communities; and (c) publishing significant texts of various religions to promote knowledge, mutual understanding and appreciation.

N. Qatar

45. The authorities of Qatar stressed the importance of interreligious dialogue as a way to stimulate tolerance and find a common denominator among people. As religions and beliefs are the foundations of civilizations and essential features of cultural identities, they must take an integral part in the broader intercultural dialogue. The role of the United Nations and of UNESCO is essential to building global peace. International colloquiums, conferences and other cultural gatherings are important ways to promote dialogue for a better understanding of cultures and religions. To maximize the benefits from these events, their intellectual and objective dimension should be stressed over their political dimension, allowing for full freedom to deal with key issues and explore ways to solve them. The circles of these events should also be enlarged to diverse religious orientations and institutions, using recent conferences such as the one held in Qatar as a nucleus for broader global events. It is also important to select effective religious leaders as participants and involve the media in order to publicize these manifestations. Interreligious dialogue should also stress the unity of the origins of humanity and present diversity as a natural phenomenon.

O. Serbia and Montenegro

46. In accordance with the Charter on Human and Minority Rights and Civil Liberties of Serbia and Montenegro, religious communities are separate from the State and are free to independently regulate their internal organization, religious activities and rites. Interreligious cooperation is first and foremost organized by religious organizations themselves and remains totally free from any interference from the State. However, bearing in mind the need to promote better understanding among religions, the Government provides financial assistance to multireligious meetings and events organized by religious organizations to discuss social, historical, cultural and civilization related matters. The Government especially encourages and finances cultural projects organized jointly by religious organizations with a view to promoting universal religious values and demonstrating that these values are compatible with those of modern civilization.

47. In the Republic of Serbia, efforts have been made to enhance dialogue among religions in the political sphere. For example, the Council for National Minorities in the Republic, which includes the Minister of Religions, consults religious organizations on all key issues. The Council urges religious organizations to help resolve inter-ethnic disputes and alleviate related tensions. In the Republic of Montenegro, the Council for the Protection of the Rights of Members of National and Ethnic Groups has been established with a view to maintaining and promoting

their identity. The Council includes all religious leaders and is headed by the President of the Republic.

48. The promotion of interreligious dialogue includes raising awareness regarding the link between religions and the freedom of thought and conscience as well as on the connection between religion, ethics and social values. Public campaigns for the promotion of human rights in general and on the freedom of thought, conscience and religion in particular are primarily conducted by the media, on a daily basis.

49. Churches and religious communities freely propagate the connection between religion, ethics and social values by publicly promoting their ethical component and role in creating a system based on democratic values. Consequently, they are recognized and accepted as an important actor for the democratization of society, respect among social groups and the resolution of social conflicts.

50. Given the crucial role of education in strengthening interreligious understanding and in overcoming stereotypes, primary and secondary education curricula include elements that contribute to the knowledge of religions and cultures present in the country and elsewhere and to the promotion of religious and cultural tolerance.

51. In elementary and secondary schools in the Republic of Serbia, religious education has been regularly taught as an optional class. The curricula and textbooks are drafted by the Government Commission for Religious Education in Public Schools. Representatives from all confessions in Serbia are represented in this Commission, whose major task is to harmonize curricula and make programmes that will encourage pupils to gain knowledge of other religions and promote tolerance and dialogue.

52. As part of the governmental efforts to promote interreligious dialogue, steps are taken to protect cultural heritage, primarily religious shrines. Serbia and Montenegro is a State party to relevant international treaties. According to national legislation, as owners, churches and religious communities take care of religious shrines. However, the latter are maintained and repaired by specialized State institutions with financial resources from the State budget.

P. Syrian Arab Republic

53. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic stressed that the Syrian society was a single and united family. Both Muslim and Christian citizens share the same heritage and national values in a spirit of brotherhood. This harmony is deeply rooted in the history of the country and there is no need for superficial dialogue, which would contradict this social reality.

Q. Ukraine

54. The Government of Ukraine stressed that the Constitution of the country explicitly recognized freedom of religion. In addition, a specific law has been adopted to guarantee and protect freedom of conscience and worship. This legislation also encourages dialogue among religions.

III. Views of the United Nations system organizations

A. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

55. In recognition of the fact that dialogue in the present global circumstances needs to address a complex range of socio-political issues and parameters, UNESCO has broadened and intensified the scope of its activities in the field of dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples by identifying concrete action at the global, regional and subregional levels.

56. A thematic debate on the subject of "New Approaches and Concrete Actions in the Dialogue among Civilizations" was held by the UNESCO Executive Board in October 2004, underlining the growing importance attached by all member States to dialogue, prompted by a sense of shared vulnerability and a corresponding sense of responsibility to act. The debate, based on an information document by the secretariat, also pointed to the development of a sense of self-reflexivity in relation to others and the need to develop a sense of respect for the other. In this sense, all civilizations ought to become "learning civilizations" enabling the development of a broad dialogue among and with other civilizations.

57. A major aim of interreligious dialogue, which forms part of the broader intercultural dialogue, is to promote dialogue between different religions and faiths with a view to increasing mutual knowledge about spiritual traditions and their underlying values, thus enhancing the understanding among the wider cultural communities. Indeed, the new draft programme and budget for 2006 and 2007, prepared by the Director-General for consideration by the Executive Board and General Conference of UNESCO has designated the promotion of interfaith dialogue as a flagship activity of the organization.

58. Over the past years, UNESCO has brought together on a regular basis eminent religious figures from the monotheistic faiths, from different spiritual traditions and from various intellectual communities, in thematic meetings based on interdisciplinary research, often supported by the UNESCO network of chairs. Focus has typically been on countries in transition or in post-conflict situations where significant cultural exchanges and reciprocal influence have played a constitutive historical role. This can be demonstrated in Asia through the initiative on the subject of "The Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue" and reflected in the more recent concept of common heritage and plural identity, which emerged from the United Nations Year for Cultural Heritage (2002) and from the thirtieth anniversary of the World Heritage Convention.

59. Today, there is a growing recognition that interreligious dialogue must be expanded to contribute proactively to social cohesion and stability everywhere. Religious leaders are called to reinforce among their congregations and faithful the precepts of the dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, in particular the broadly agreed body of commonly shared ethical values.

60. There is a need to reinforce practical and effective action in this domain. Education will be a key modality, especially quality education with its core features of textbook revision, teachers training and efforts to eradicate stereotypes and promote intercultural understanding, universally shared values, human rights, multilingual education and the change of gender perceptions.

61. Cultural diversity and heritage, as the most tangible expressions of human creativity and interaction, are also emerging as foundations of identity and as tools for dialogue and reconciliation. Cultural heritage, in both its tangible and intangible forms, embodies the symbolic values of cultural identities and constitutes a fundamental reference for structuring societies. A sharp focus must therefore be maintained on the links that unify the defence of cultural diversity, the safeguarding of cultural heritage and the search for sustainable development.

62. All these activities and orientations have been captured in a comprehensive document submitted by the UNESCO Director-General to the Executive Board in April 2005.

63. Based on the experience with the December 2004 Regional Summit on Interreligious and Interethnic Dialogue, held in Tirana, UNESCO action in the area of interreligious dialogue will seek to inform and shape overt exchange and interaction among individuals and groups of different cultural and religious backgrounds with a view to creating new platforms for harmonious coexistence and generating new responses to recognized mutual interests and common needs.

64. In December 2003, UNESCO organized an international congress on the dialogue on civilizations, religions and cultures in West Africa, which was held in Abuja. The proceedings of this congress have recently been published by the University of Nigeria in Nsukka.

65. On 5 April 2005, UNESCO organized a widely covered international event at which the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the President of Algeria spoke about their vision of the future of the dialogue among civilizations, including interreligious and interfaith dialogue.[1] Before an audience of Ministers, representatives of UNESCO member States, religious leaders from all faith, intellectuals and experts, both leaders discussed their visions of the future. The President of the Islamic Republic of Iran submitted a proposal for establishing an institution to be called the international forum for dialogue among civilizations. The conceptual framework for this new entity stressed the importance of the realization of peace and justice; promotion of spirituality and morality; and negation and elimination of violence and terror at national, regional and international levels. It further stated that the challenge now facing international institutions engaged in the discourse on dialogue, including UNESCO, concerns how to find proper mechanisms for playing inter-civilizational roles.

66. On 9 and 10 May 2005, UNESCO participated in a conference in Tehran, held by the Department of the Environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on the subject of "Environment, Peace and the Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures". The conference highlighted the role of spiritual leaders and faith-based approaches to the challenges at hand.[2]

B. United Nations Population Fund

67. The International Conference for Population and Development and the preparatory negotiations that preceded it were marked by an overall confluence of views on sensitive issues such as reproductive health, gender equality and equity and women's empowerment. Negotiations on these sensitive issues were facilitated

by the inclusion of a paragraph in the Programme of Action of the Conference, which refers specifically to the consideration of religious and ethical values in the implementation of its recommendations.

68. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), having realized this critical need early on and recognized that no one institution and no single strategy can bring development goals to fruition, has been engaged in growing collaboration with members of religious communities, not only to further the goals of the Fund, but also to create those necessary bridges, based on dialogue and mutual respect, between the United Nations and what it stands for and the different religious establishments in the world.

69. The UNFPA position on this engagement is based on the assumption that religion is a common denominator among peoples. Religions have constituents who serve in the public and political spheres and decide priorities, shape policies, allocate resources and implement programmes. Many of the constituents of religions are women and men who are the intended beneficiaries of UNFPA policies and programmes. Much more than being passive recipients of such programmes, people of faith are capable of mobilizing and empowering communities to demand attention and seek solutions from Governments and other actors on issues ranging from gender-based violence and maternal deaths to family planning. Some major religions have a strong presence in villages, towns and cities, where they have developed vast networks of schools, universities, banks, communications and media, health care and welfare systems. The work of UNFPA on reproductive health and rights, population and development are grounded on principles that recognize and respect the dignity, integrity and equality of women and men. Religious traditions essentially uphold these same principles.

70. UNFPA engagement, dialogue and partnerships have yielded results that have been beneficial to both UNFPA and the religious institutions. For example, in several African countries, cooperation with Christian and Muslim religious leaders has been fruitful in training and operational activities related to reproductive health services. UNFPA also supports events focused on the perception that religions have of family planning, which help correct possible misperception and allow for widespread debates on these issues. Joint work with religious and interfaith groups is carried out to prevent HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa, and similar sensitization has started on female genital cutting and early marriages. Thus, UNFPA initiatives to tap the powerful potential of religions constitute a step in the right direction.

C. Department of Public Information

71. The promotion of interreligious dialogue within the context of the global agenda for dialogue among civilizations is a priority issue for the Department of Public Information. In an effort to examine different manifestations of intolerance and explore ways to promote respect and understanding among peoples, it launched a series of seminars in 2004 on the subject of "Unlearning Intolerance". The first two seminars focused on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia respectively. The third seminar, to be held in conjunction with the observance of World Press Freedom Day (3 May), will focus on mitigating the role that the media can and does play in fanning the flames of intolerance.

72. Designed as an open forum involving civil society organizations, members of the religious community and academia, the series offers the opportunity to discuss how intolerance, wherever it exists and for whatever reasons, can be "unlearned" through education, inclusion and example. As a result of the outreach and interest generated by the seminar series, many civil society organizations have expressed interest in exploring ways to work with the Department.

73. These efforts are further reinforced through the activities of United Nations information centres, including a seminar on interreligious dialogue by the United Nations information centre in Harare, poster competition by the United Nations office in Yerevan and media round tables by the United Nations offices in Minsk and Almaty. The United Nations information centre in Sydney, Australia, in conjunction with the advertising company Saatchi and Saatchi, successfully placed advertisements with the theme "tolerance free of charge" in the Sydney Morning Herald.

Notes

[1] See http://www.unesco.org/dialogue/en/news.html.

[2] See www.iisd.ca/sd/sdter.